

Statement of the Honorable Charles W. Boustany, Jr., M.D.  
Legislative Hearing of the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Health  
July 14, 2015

Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley and Subcommittee Members:

First, thank you to Chairman Benishek, Ranking Member Brownley and all Subcommittee members for inviting me to testify before you today. As the Committee considers reforms to Department of Veterans Affairs' operations, I appreciate the opportunity to speak on behalf of my legislation, H.R. 1862, the Veterans' Credit Protection Act.

Unfortunately, the VA's long history of delayed payments has brought me here today. Too many veterans are forced to contact my office to resolve credit issues caused by the VA's refusal to pay claims for emergency medical care. When these brave Americans require a trip to the emergency room because they believe their lives are in danger, the last thing on their minds should be fear that the VA will fail to pay their claims.

One such veteran, Mr. Al Theriot of Abbeville, LA, waited over two years for the VA to finally process and pay his emergency medical care bills, which the Agency only did after Mr. Theriot contacted my office and appeared on local television twice to describe his experiences. This is absolutely unacceptable.

I submitted documentation from the VA to the Subcommittee in early June demonstrating the scale of this problem. To reiterate those findings, as of data provided to me in April 2015, the VA's Chief Business Office indicated that only 14% of emergency medical care claims originating from VISN 16, which includes my home state of Louisiana, were being processed within 30 days. In total, the data demonstrates a nationwide backlog of over \$878 million.

The Veterans' Credit Protection Act is an important step to rooting out the problems within the VA that caused this out-of-control backlog.

First, my legislation mandates the VA set up a toll-free hotline for veterans to report credit issues caused by delayed emergency medical care claims. It also requires the VA to conduct outreach alerting veterans of how to resolve these issues. Too often, veterans tell me they cannot get in touch with the VA, or that the employees they speak with cannot adequately answer their questions.

Creating a dedicated call line and ensuring the VA implements a better framework for communicating solutions with veterans is an absolutely necessary step toward eliminating the backlog.

My bill also requires the VA to report annually to Congress on the Chief Business Office's effectiveness with respect to timely claims processing. Their report must include information on the number of veterans who have reported credit issues due to delayed payments, the number of proper invoices submitted, the amounts owed on those invoices and how long it took the VA to pay those claims.

In addition to requiring the VA to report on the status of claims, H.R. 1862 aims to improve Chief Business Office operations by requiring the VA to examine comments made by medical providers regarding the claims processing system and delayed payments, and report these comments to Congress, along with a description of best practices to ensure timely claims payment in the future.

No veteran should ever have to decide whether or not to sacrifice their health and safety to avoid a potential financial burden if the VA fails to pay for a trip to the emergency room. I sincerely thank the Subcommittee for your efforts to ensure better care of America's veterans, and for inviting me to be part of this important discussion.